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Subject: EPA Push To Link Health Care, Environmental Policy Draws Mixed Reaction

EPA Push To Link Health Care, Environmental Policy Draws Mixed Reaction

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson's ongoing effort to forge a link between improving health care and the need for Congress to pass climate cap-and-trade legislation and the agency to issue stricter environmental rules is drawing a mixed response from a broad range of observers, with some saying it is unlikely to yield political dividends.

Trying to make a political connection between health care benefits of reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and pending climate bills in Congress in particular may be a wasted effort, one industry source says, because it may not sway any lawmakers who are undecided or opposed to climate legislation. "Even if you can make that argument [of a link between health and climate], I don't think it brings any new votes," according to the source.

"Health care reform is controversial and at its razor's edge, and cap-and-trade is controversial and at its razor's edge. How combining those two issues makes political sense is a mystery to me," a former Senate aide adds.

Several environmentalists, however, say Jackson is only proclaiming public health benefits of environmental rules like the agency has long done. Air pollution rules, in particular, provide vast public health benefits in proportion to their costs, one activist argues, and EPA has always touted those benefits.

And an EPA spokesman says Jackson is emphasizing "public health" benefits of aggressive agency rulemakings on broad topics, not tying the environment to health care reform legislation before Congress.

Still, Jackson has cited high health care costs in arguing for stricter environmental rules. For example, after the House passed its landmark health care reform bill in early November, the administrator in a speech to public health officials made the case for strict EPA regulation of GHGs and other emissions, toxic chemicals and other forms of pollution, saying the releases harm human health and drive up health care costs.

And Jackson Nov. 20 appeared at a White House event with Health & Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to bolster the nexus between health care and the need for strict environmental rules.

Jackson at the event said stricter environmental regulations will drive down health insurance costs. "Our discussion [about energy reform] would be incomplete without talking about . . . an urban business owner who has to pay higher health care premiums because her workers get sick more often. . . . Energy reform and environmental protection can be an ounce of prevention that makes a huge difference in our public

health future.”

At the same event Sebelius said HHS is “rapidly expanding” its focus on environmental issues and is teaming with EPA on the work because of the health care implications posed by climate change.

“While environmental concerns have not always been the top priority for [HHS], as we learn more about the connections between GHG emissions and public health, we’ve been rapidly expanding our activities across the department,” Sebelius said, “This is not an afterthought for the department. It’s a natural extension of our public health strategy. We intend to be collaborative partners in moving forward on a critical U.S. strategy.”

“More and more we understand that health care is not just something that happens in a doctor’s office,” but includes environmental factors and presumably EPA rules to improve environmental health.

Health Benefits Of Climate Change Mitigation

In a related development, the British medical journal *The Lancet* Nov. 25 published a series of articles finding that reducing GHGs -- particularly short-lived GHGs such as black carbon -- produces multiple “co-benefits” for improving public health. *The Lancet* papers highlight a “real opportunity for prevention” of adverse health effects by acting first on cutting GHGs, according to Linda Birnbaum, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. “Prevention is what we need to get into the health care debate,” she said.

But Jackson’s effort on health care costs is not tied solely to climate, and in remarks Nov. 8 to the American Public Health Association (APHA) in Philadelphia Nov. 8 the administrator said that many types of pollution cause increased health care costs and strict EPA rules to reduce that pollution could lower those costs.

“The poor who get sick because of toxins in their neighborhoods are the same people who typically seek treatment in emergency rooms. That drives up health care costs for everyone. And environmental health issues hold back economic growth,” Jackson said, according to her prepared remarks.

Critics of the attempt to link health care costs with the need for stricter environmental rules -- particularly climate cap-and-trade -- say that while that approach “smacks of desperation,” according to the industry source, a separate effort by activists to tie climate change to national security implications may be more fruitful.

Environmentalists have been recently pursuing alliances with veterans groups with hopes that lawmakers will be more receptive to veterans as messengers of the argument that climate change could imperil the country’s national interest abroad. Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) is also arguing that global warming poses a grave threat to national security, an argument that appears aimed at building support among Republicans and moderate Democrats for the cap-and-trade plan he is shepherding through the Senate. -- *Jonathan Strong*